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Stretchy time or screen time: How early years practitioners conceptualise time in relation to children's digital play

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Abstract

There is a tension between the early years (EY) ideal of 'stretchy time' for free-flow play and discourses surrounding children's digital play, which emphasise the need for time limits. To explore this tension further, we engaged in collaborative reflective dialogue with 20 EY practitioners in a workshop exploring apps for young children. Based on a thematic analysis of the written notes made by practitioners during the workshop, we present four conceptualisations of time adopted by practitioners in relation to digital play: balance, limitation, self-regulation and open exploration. . We then present three factors that shape these conceptualisations of time: 1) whether apps are seen as tools or activities, 2) pedagogic emphasis on purposefulness versus playfulness and 3) take-up of popular discourses of concern. Based on the findings, we suggest how practitioners might use observation, reflection and their own playful experiences as a way of generating new possibilities for managing time around digital play in EY environments.

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Abstract

There is a tension between the early years (EY) ideal of 'stretchy time' for free-flow play and discourses surrounding children's digital play, which emphasise the need for time limits. To explore this tension further, we engaged in collaborative reflective dialogue with 20 EY practitioners in a workshop exploring apps for young children. Based on a thematic analysis of the written notes made by practitioners during the workshop, we present four conceptualisations of time adopted by practitioners in relation to digital play: balance, limitation, self-regulation and open exploration.. We then present three factors that shape these conceptualisations of time: 1) whether apps are seen as tools or activities, 2) pedagogic emphasis on purposefulness versus playfulness and 3) take-up of popular discourses of concern. Based on the findings, we suggest how practitioners might use observation, reflection and their own playful experiences as a way of generating new possibilities for managing time around digital play in EY environments.

Introduction

While 'stretchy time' and free-flow play are ideals in early years (EY) learning provision (Craft et al., 2012; Craft et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2013), children's digital play experiences are shaped by a popular discourse that children's digital engagement – their 'screen time' – needs to be limited (Hamilton et al., 2016; Squire and Steinkuehler, 2017). Given these two opposing approaches to time, what happens when practitioners conceptualise and manage time in relation to children's digital play? In this paper, we explore practitioners' conceptualisations of time in relation to digital play through our analysis of discussions emerging from a workshop attended by 20 EY practitioners that involved collaborative hands-on exploration of popular apps available for children. While there is a growing body of research that investigates how

children engage with different forms of digital play, our focus is on practitioners' attitudes as a key component of the dynamic context that surrounds this digital play.

In the following background sections, previous research and theoretical perspectives are reviewed relating to a) time as an aspect of the EY classroom context and b) popular discourses about time in relation to children's digital play. Children's digital play is taken to be play experiences that involve digital technologies to some extent, with an awareness that these experiences will weave in and out of digital and physical environments (Burnett et al., 2014; Marsh, 2017). In this article, digital play is explored through a particular focus on mobile app environments.

Time as an aspect of the EY classroom context

How semiotic resources – such as the resources involved in children's digital play – are taken up will depend on not just the material properties of those resources, but the sociocultural context in which the resources are situated (van Leeuwen, 2005; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). The 'Digital Play System' described by Arnott (2016) focuses on children's observable interactions with digital technologies, while the wider Preschool System comprises routines and practices that dynamically interact with children's experiences of digital play. Burnett (2014) invokes the concept of 'classroom-ness' to highlight the ways in which digital resources are shaped in specific ways by the classroom context. Classrooms have particular priorities and practices that influence how resources are taken up. For example, EY learning environments tend to place an emphasis on turn-taking (Sakr, 2017; Sakr & Scollan, 2019). How time is conceptualised and managed in relation to particular semiotic resources is an essential component of the sociocultural context. What do we already know about how time is conceptualised and managed practised more generally in the EY learning environment? EY pedagogy in the UK tends to be characterised by an explicit commitment to free-flow play (Stephen, 2010). In this approach, children are given a high level of freedom to engage with activities and resources how and when they choose. Influential research focusing on the conditions for children's 'possibility thinking' promotes 'stretchy time' where practitioners make decisions about time and transitions on the basis of their responsive observations of children's engagement as it unfolds in the moment (Craft et al., 2014; Craft et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2013).

Although flexibility around time and space is built into the ideal of the EY free-flow learning environment, this does not mean that this is what happens in practice. As research consistently demonstrates, there can be a stark contrast between what practitioners hold up as an ideal in early years education and what becomes everyday practice (Stephen, 2010; McInnes et al., 2011). Indeed, observational studies in EY settings have highlighted the way in which time can be an inflexible aspect of daily life in early childhood settings, undermining the pedagogic commitment to free-flow play and learning. Rose and Whitty (2010), taking a Foucauldian approach, describe this as the ‘tyranny of clock time’ . Inspired by the pedagogic experiments of Wien and Kirby-Smith (1998), they explored what happened when they removed all clocks and watches from a nursery. After a fortnight, they found that practitioners became more critically aware of the previous ‘frustration of their clocked lives’ (p. 264), and how with the clocks gone, they could open up, relax and listen more intently to the children around them.

When routines prompt practitioners to think about time in terms of discrete portions, they may focus more on duration and less on the intensity of time (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013). Thus, while popular EY rhetoric suggests the need to prioritise intensity over duration (through the deployment of ‘stretchy time’), ethnographic observations from diverse theoretical orientations suggest that there tends to be more of a focus on the durational aspect of time. In the following section, this tension is related more specifically to the debates surrounding children’s digital play.

Time and children’s digital play

Much of the popular discourse surrounding digital technologies in early childhood relates to time and limiting the amount of time that children spend engaging with screens. The UK National Health Service (NHS) recommendations are to restrict screen time for children to less than 2 hours a day. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) provide customised downloadable family plans that parents/carers fill in for themselves but these centre around decisions about how much time is acceptable for screens to be on or available. As discussed in the previous section, a discourse that focuses almost exclusively on duration may detract attention from what is going on in that time (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013). The AAP family plan for example

mentions nothing about parents managing or mediating the quality of the screen interactions that children in the family have. There is an assumption that 'screen time' is homogenous. On the other hand, Squire & Steinkuehler (2017) argue that what matters is not 'how much' but 'how':

Not all screen time is the same, just as not all off-screen time is the same ... (p. 11).

According to Squire and Steinkuehler, adults who take an approach of limiting screen time might be more likely to disengage from considering their role in proactive mediation of children's digital play as it actually unfolds.

In an EY context, how teachers conceptualise and manage time in relation to digital play is likely to depend on various factors. Firstly, Nikolopoulou and Gialmas (2015) have shown that preschool teachers' responses to digital play and its integration into the classroom depend on their own experiences and confidence with digital technologies. Secondly, Hatzigianni and Kalaitzidis (2018) show a link between pedagogic discourses and views of technology, whereby practitioners who emphasise the identity of children as active explorers and creators are more likely to be positive about integrating digital technologies into play-based learning. Furthermore, practitioners will be balancing different attitudes and perspectives in their approach to digital play. They may be influenced by parents' perspectives, which can prioritise clear learning gains in numeracy and literacy (Wartella et al., 2013) or alternatively feel that their commitment to open-ended play as EY practitioners is jeopardised by the more linear game-playing experience offered by many apps on the market (Colliver et al., 2019).

While these studies are important for understanding practitioners' perspectives on digital play, none that we know of specifically consider how time is conceptualised by practitioners in relation to digital play. To contribute to the project of understanding the ecologies of children's digital play in early childhood educational contexts, our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do early years practitioners conceptualise time in relation to children's digital play?

RQ2: What factors influence the conceptualisations of time that practitioners develop in relation to digital play?

About the research

Our research focused on the experiences and perceptions of one particular group of EY practitioners based in the UK. It was our aim to work with these practitioners in a process of collaborative reflection underpinned by the values of democratic reflective practice (Chappell and Craft, 2011). Through such collaborative reflection, researchers and teachers engage in dialogues that probe, challenge and reconceptualise the 'lived space' – in this case, EY practice. The emphasis of the research is therefore on interpreting practitioners' dialogues, and thinking about the various discourses at work in these dialogues, rather than pursuing any notion of objective truth. Practically, the forum through which we enabled collaborative reflection was a workshop attended by 20 EY practitioners.

On a Saturday in May 2018, we hosted a free workshop at our university for EY practitioners on the topic of 'Apps for children'. Practitioners were recruited to attend the workshop primarily through email contact with partner nurseries and schools, and through the Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) programme offered at the university. All of the practitioners worked in or around London. As practitioners in English settings, they follow the Early Years Foundation Stage, a statutory framework outlining learning and development from birth to five. In the most recent version of the EYFS (2017), 'technology' is mentioned as part of one of four specific areas of development: 'understanding the world'. There is no specific mention of digital technologies or digital play in the EYFS. Thus, whether English settings offer opportunities for digital play and relevant training for practitioners is up to them.

Despite all following the EYFS, practitioners attending came from a diverse range of settings. Some were based in nurseries within schools while others worked in private nursery settings. While all of the practitioners were based in or around London, the settings they represented were located in different geographical and social contexts – urban, suburban or rural. They served distinct communities, from a prestigious preparatory school, to nurseries offering predominantly subsidised childcare to families identified as 'low income' by the local authority. The practitioners were also diverse in terms of their experience with digital technologies. While levels of experience are likely to influence attitudes expressed (Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015), exploring this particular relationship is beyond the remit of this article.

The workshop was designed to enable practitioners to engage together in hands-on exploration of 15 different apps for young children (0-8 years old), as well as other related tasks, such as brainstorming a new app for children. Practitioners worked in groups of 4 participants. Following a brief introduction explaining the aims of the day, the groups encountered five different activity 'stations', each for 20-30 minutes. At three of the stations there were iPads available with a particular set of five apps displayed on the screen (so a total of 15 apps were explored during the workshop). All of the apps chosen except for one met the criteria of being for the age range 2-8 years, and were on the 'best apps for children' list provided by Common Sense Media – a popular touchstone for educators and parents in planning for digital play and media use among children. From this list, we decided on 14 apps that we felt were more appropriate for younger children (under 5 years) and also represented diversity of approach and content. We purposefully chose some apps that offered guided play and others that were more open-ended; we also chose some apps that clearly related to the academic concerns of literacy and numeracy, versus others that promoted creativity, problem-solving and/or understanding the world. In addition to these 14 apps, we included the app 'Our Story' which was developed by The Open University, and encourages multimodal storytelling among young children. The distinct 'offer' of each app is outlined in table 1.

Table 1. [about here](#)

At table 4 in the workshop, participants found task instructions about brainstorming their own app and were given paper and pens on which to do this. At table 5, participants were asked to discuss their responses to five photographs of children engaging in various ways with digital technologies. At the end of the day, there was a final 45 minute discussion between all of the participants attending the workshop. The day was organised to maximise discussion elicited through active engagement and relevant visual stimuli (Bagnoli, 2009). We recognise the irony in the design of the workshop according to neat segments of time as opposed to a more free-flow format prioritising 'stretchy time'. This may have impacted on the kinds of discourses that emerged through the workshop. Future workshops in this field might benefit from experimenting with a fluid format more closely aligned to the principles and practices of free-flow play. The analysis presented in this paper is based on participants' written

reflections made over the course of the day, which took the form of a) notes made about particular apps at the app exploration 'stations', b) notes for app ideas and c) feedback forms collected at the end of the workshop. Written notes were also made by the researchers immediately after the workshop, recording memories of interactions that were felt to be important.

All participants were informed at the beginning of the workshop about our research aims in relation to their engagement over the course of the day. They were assured that, should they wish to participate in the research, their comments and input would remain anonymous. Written consent was provided by all those attending the workshop. In conducting and disseminating the research, we have followed the British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines for ethical research, and full ethical approval for the research was granted by the university's ethics committee.

Following the workshop, we applied an inductive thematic analysis to the practitioners' written comments, focusing only on those comments that we felt related back to the research questions. We used the steps of a thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involve identifying keywords and phrases, developing codes, and organising these codes into themes. However, rather than doing this with the aim of creating a representative and/or comprehensive catalogue of the participants' perspectives, we saw the value of the process in terms of its capacity to help us look more closely at the data and see points of resonance and connection (MacLure, 2013).

As a result of this process, we started to develop two ways of organising the findings. The first of these was a set of four conceptualisations of time that manifested in the participants' written comments, followed by three factors that appeared to shape these conceptualisations.

The organisation of the findings into neat categories is not presented by us as a 'true' reflection of how practitioners think or even how behaviours manifest in everyday contexts of practice. Our organisation of the written comments is a process through which we aim to make sense of the various perspectives that were voiced as part of the research process. While these perspectives help us to make sense of interactions in the messiness of everyday practice, it is important to recognise that the perspectives themselves are messy, running into each other and overlapping in multiple ways.

Different conceptualisations of time in relation to digital play

Close analysis of the practitioners' written comments at various stages of the workshop suggested four broad ways in which practitioners conceptualised time in relation to play. These were:

- 1) Balance
- 2) Limitation
- 3) Self-regulation
- 4) Open exploration

Each conceptualisation is outlined in more detail below with illustrative comments.

Balance

Practitioners highlighted the need to balance digital engagement with other forms of play and learning: as one participant suggested: 'technology needs to be a balance'. Digital play was conceptualised in contrast to other forms of play, that were equally (if not more) important:

Technology is a useful tool but it has to be used purposefully and in balance with other aspects of life.

There is a place for technology but the content and time needs to be managed.

It's interesting to see how technology can play a part in learning. How to use it is a question that needs consideration.

In this conceptualisation, the role of the practitioner is to ensure that digital play does not 'take over' but only 'plays a part'. It requires an appropriate amount of time in the course of a typical day and the time dedicated for digital play is seen as potentially detracting from time for other important activities.

Limitation

Some practitioner comments emphasise the need to limit the time children spend engaging with digital technologies.

The time should be limited

Monitor/select more carefully the apps that children have access to

Unlike those comments advocating 'balance', the idea that access should be limited did not appear to be because of an emphasis on the importance of other activities, but more as a result of the concerns associated with digital play. These included that it would be sedentary, unsocial and unimaginative (more detail on these perspectives appears in the following sections). In the conceptualisation of limitation, digital play is considered as not just impoverished in relation to the 'real world' activities (as is implied in many of the comments relating to balance), but as detrimental if children are 'over-exposed'.

Self-regulation

In this conceptualisation, practitioners stress the importance of normalising digital engagement and digital play so that children learn skills of managing and regulating their own time using digital technologies. The ideal is 'balance' but the emphasis is on children learning this for themselves rather than practitioners enforcing it.

Apps should be normalised and not a reward and when implemented and well modelled, do work well.

Look into making tech more available so children don't crave it and learn to manage their own time on it.

Open Exploration

Some practitioner comments highlighted the need to enable children to explore digital play and technologies for themselves. Digital environments were seen as an opportunity for children to discover and develop their own interests, as the following comments illustrate.

Empower children to lead their own technology journey

Importance of technology in education empowering children to be active in their relationships with technology

How apps can build on children's interests and ideas, enable them to research and discover and investigate

In this conceptualisation, engagement is built around passions and interests rather than particular time-defined activities, and stretchy time is an appropriate ideal in the management of time around digital play. Digital play is not positioned in opposition to other forms of activity, but instead there is the potential for fluidity as children move play ideas and activities between different types of environment, including digital environments.

Three factors shaping conceptualisations of time in relation to digital play

Through further analysis, we identified three factors that influence practitioners' conceptualisations of time in relation to digital play. These factors help us to understand why certain conceptualisations of time in relation to digital play emerge. The factors are:

- 1) Digital apps as tools or activities
- 2) Pedagogic emphasis on purposefulness versus playfulness
- 3) Take-up of popular discourses of concern around children's digital play

Each of these is explored in more depth below, including through commentary on illustrative quotes from practitioners and links to relevant literature.

Digital apps as tools or activities

Many practitioners discussed digital play as a 'part' of children's learning and experience, but what was the nature of the 'part' that they imagined? Did they imagine a single part of a whole, like a slice of a cake, or did they imagine a part that runs continuously alongside other parts? While we can conceptualise digital engagement in either way, the practitioners' comments suggest that they often saw 'technology' as an activity in itself (a slice of the cake), rather than as a practice that – like marbling in the cake – runs through every piece, contributing to many different kinds of play (Figure 1).

Figure 1. about here

In the former perspective, digital engagement – or ‘technology’ in the words of the practitioners – becomes its own play type. This is evident in comments where other forms of play are seen as mutually exclusive in relation to digital play:

I'd allow children to know and learn about technology but also let them know that activities such as playing/cooperating through communication with peers is also fun

The perception that playing, cooperating and communicating are alternatives to digital play suggests that the latter is seen as an activity in itself.

The potential benefits of seeing digital apps as tools rather than activities are brought to the fore when we consider the responses of the practitioners to one particular app provided at the workshop: Our Story. Our Story is a free app created by researchers and designers at the Open University, UK. It is a simple app that enables users to gather photographs, written captions, audio recordings and videos together and to sequence these into a storyboard that they can then play back. This app appeared to be by far the most popular app presented on the day, and was mentioned in many of the feedback forms at the end of the day, as well as prompting exclusively positive comments on the specific feedback sheet. What the practitioners appeared to find appealing about this app was that it could be incorporated into lots of existing activities and forms of play that they associated with early childhood education:

Imaginative – could be used for group activities

Builds confidence if asked to present story to rest of class

Endless possibilities

Drama role play ‘freeze frames’

Make your own stories

Lots of early learning goals can be covered

Sequencing pictures

Recounts/recipes

My favourite – the children can practise how the story is structured ‘once upon a time...’

The comments above show how the app was viewed as support for what was already going on in settings rather than constituting an alternative activity that would potentially divert children from practitioners’ preferred activities.

Interestingly, practitioners’ own app ideas tended not to follow this model. The majority of the practitioners’ app ideas were goal-orientated, primarily relating to rote learning of literacy or numeracy skills, and therefore showcased the ‘app as activity’ mind-set.

When practitioners think about apps as activities in themselves, they are more concerned about balancing engagement between digital play and other forms of play. As a result, they are more likely to implement time limits around digital play, since this is seen as an activity that has the potential to encroach on other important experiences that are part of the young child’s play and learning. If, on the other hand, practitioners think about apps (and digital technologies more generally) as tools, they will be less concerned about the barriers in time that separate digital play from other forms of activity. They will be more likely to conceptualise flows of play moving more fluidly, using all types of media available in the learning environment (Burnett et al., 2014, , March, 2017). This would advocate more openness to exploration in digital play environments without limits.

Pedagogic emphasis on purposefulness versus playfulness

As mentioned above, the practitioners’ own app ideas were remarkably goal-orientated, as opposed to emphasising open-ended and playful exploration. Suggestions included an app that gamifies the quick mental recall of number factors, an app to prompt spelling practice, and an app that offers timed phonics recall. Why are these ideas all so markedly constrained? Is this the result of how practitioners conceptualise the affordances of the digital environment – that apps are best suited to the gamification of rote learning? Or is this related to an encroaching tendency in EY settings to place more of an emphasis on learning objectives as opposed to free-flow play (Jarvis & Whitebread, 2018)?

In the feedback on specific apps, there was significant scepticism in relation to those apps that did not appear to 'go' anywhere and involved more open-ended exploration. Practitioners commented on such apps with criticisms like:

No clear instructions

Pointless

The aim of the app was not really clear

While it is possible that this relates to wider tensions about the value of play in EY settings, and how these have been influenced by pressures on academic achievement and measurement among even the youngest learners, we wonder whether the emphasis on purposefulness over playfulness in this particular workshop may have been exacerbated by practitioners' uncertainties about digital play environments. Much of the initial training that EY practitioners undertake relates to learning a vocabulary to support the defence of play. They learn for example, how to understand play in terms of cognitive, physical, emotional and social learning (Moyle, 2014; Bruce, 2001; Hughes, 2011). Perhaps practitioners find it more difficult to engage with the playfulness of digital play because there are not the same explanations to hand about its potential value in relation to children's learning and wellbeing. In the popular media, digital play is – at best – a 'bit of fun' for children, while research observations of digital play suggest many continuities in the purposes of play between online and offline environments (Marsh, 2010; Marsh et al, 2016, Marsh, 2017). Importantly, frameworks to support practitioners to understand digital play and to update their mental models of what play is, are emerging. For example, Edwards and Bird (2017) have developed the digital play framework to 'help teachers observe, plan for and integrate technologies with play-based learning' (p. 1149) and Fleer (2018) shows how psychological development can be evidenced in observations of digital play.

When practitioners prioritise purposefulness over playfulness, whether this is specific to digital engagement or a more general emphasis in their EY practice, children's digital play is likely to be something that becomes not just time-limited, but also time-driven. By this we mean that the purpose of apps will be made sense of in terms of completing activities within a particular time frame. Those apps that are seen to be most effective will be those that achieve their purpose in the shortest amount of time. Apps that promote open-ended and playful exploration will be discarded as 'pointless'.

Take-up of popular discourses of concern around children's digital play

Our analysis showed many of the popular discourses around children's digital engagement emerging in the practitioner comments, both those offered in relation to specific apps and as feedback at the end of the day. For example, in the feedback given on a single storytelling and game app 'Flip Flap Farm', the following comments were made:

Addictive and encourages habit of screen dependence

Sedentary and unsocial

No turning pages – no physical interactions – fine motor skills (babies are swiping books)

No creativity encouraged

Risk of being used as a baby sitter – no discovery and no wow moment

No engagement with other human beings

The practitioners made an assumption that the app Flip Flap Farm would be 'unsocial', that it would involve 'no engagement' and that it would be used as a 'babysitter'. These concerns all relate to the wider sociocultural environment rather than being specific to the particular app reviewed. The practitioners projected their wider concerns onto their experiences with specific apps.

The same projection was found in research by Mavoa et al. (2017), which involved a discourse analysis of facebook discussions about children's digital engagement among EY practitioners. Practitioners were shown to repeat many of the negative discourses about digital play apparent in the popular media. Overall, they appeared to be persuaded – on the basis of little evidence – that children's digital engagement represented a 'loss' in children's experiences (socially, physically and intellectually), and was even a loss of childhood as a whole.

Feedback on specific apps often contained stark contrasts whereby an app was felt to both encourage dialogue and promote solitude. For example, in reviewing the app Toca Hair Salon which allows children to create a hairstyle for the character on the screen, one practitioner commented that it provided a 'talking point between children', while another comment assumed solitary engagement: 'it limits a child to using it by

themselves (not very social)'. The practitioners' contrasting comments show how we all bring to each app our own prejudices and assumptions about children's digital play.

Practitioners' comments also showed the tendency to position digital technologies and 'real life' activities in opposition to one another. For example, in responding to the Nosy Crow Cinderella app, a practitioner commented: 'not replacement for children reading a story'. In response to the Toca Hair Salon app, a practitioner commented 'this isn't realistic'. About the app Deckie Duck Trash Toys, comments referred to the idea that experience would be impoverished as a result of the digital nature of the play: 'limited – can be more expressive if same activity done in real life'.

It is not clear based on these comments what is the specific facet of interaction that leads to a reduction in expressiveness as a child shifts from a non-digital to a digital environment. Furthermore, some of the direct comparisons between the activity in a non-digital environment and a digital environment are entirely hypothetical. For example, it is unlikely that a young child has the opportunity to cut and style someone's hair in the 'real' world, so why would it matter whether the app is realistic or not?

We suggest that when practitioners buy into largely negative popular discourses to make sense of children's digital play they are likely to assume that children's time engaging in digital play needs to be limited. Furthermore, the 'slice of the cake' that practitioners are willing to provide for children's digital play will be reduced further if they position engagement with particular apps in direct comparison to similar tasks that can be completed in the 'real' world.

Discussion

The findings shared above have important implications for the integration of digital play in early childhood education. In particular, they suggest the need to stimulate more willingness among practitioners to experiment with the management of time in relation to digital play. The application of 'stretchy time' around digital play seems to depend on the extent to which practitioners understand play as moving fluidly across different physical-digital environments, with similar forms of play manifesting across digital and non-digital contexts (Marsh, 2010; Marsh et al., 2016; Marsh, 2017; O'Mara & Laidlaw, 2011). With this in mind, we need to continue to develop and disseminate

the tools that we offer practitioners for support with planning and observing digital play (e.g. the Digital Play Framework constructed by Edwards & Bird, 2017).

Practitioners' own observations are powerful in this respect, particularly if the observations enable a clearer sense of how forms of play move across digital-physical environments and the potentials therefore of allowing 'stretchy time'. Observations draw us into the here and now, challenging us to look closely at what is unfolding in the moment, rather than making comparisons that quickly turn into sweeping judgments about digital play (e.g. Fler, 2018). Researchers who have focused closely through observations on children's digital play as it unfolds have come away with a stronger sense of its potential (Marsh, 2010; Marsh et al., 2016; Marsh, 2017; Kucirkova & Sakr, 2015; Sakr, 2016, 2018, 2019; Wohlwend, 2015; Wohlwend, 2017a; Wohlwend, 2017b, and so on), and the same process is available to practitioners. What happens when practitioners make a conscious effort to observe digital play more often and with a more intense gaze? How do their conceptualisations of time shift as a result of these observations? This is an important avenue for further research.

Although negative attitudes towards digital play were prevalent among the practitioners' perspectives reported in this study, the workshop did also involve some expressions of genuine excitement about the creative potentials of different apps and how open-ended exploration could be an exciting context for digital play. Interestingly, even though the attitudes expressed in relation to specific apps were more often negative, the feedback comments provided at the end of the day related most often to the conceptualisation of 'open exploration'. We argue that practitioners' own open exploration and the willingness to engage with the apps in an immediately hands-on manner, prompted more excitement about the potentials of open-ended digital play among children.

Some research already suggests that practitioners' own experiences of digital play will impact on their views of digital play in the classroom (Nikolopoulou & Gialmas, 2015). Through authentic engagement in digital play, adults can begin to see the variety of forms of digital play that are available, including for example those forms of digital play that are less mainstream and more experimental. The 'slow games' genre, for example, asks for a different approach to time in the context of digital play, whereby players investigate alternative realities with no clear purpose (Thibault, 2016). Through hands-on fun, practitioners can become empowered to see themselves as digital

designers where no specific or technical expertise is required (Sakr, 2019). These possibilities have implications for the forms of professional development that might be made available to EY practitioners in relation to digital play.

The generalisability of the findings presented here is of course limited. The findings are based on discussions and comments among a single group of 20 practitioners who, though based in a diverse range of EY settings, were all based in or around London, UK. The discussions took place in a single workshop, and the design of the workshop activities will have influenced the thoughts expressed by those attending as a result of both their content and design. Many of the practitioners had a recent training connection to the university where the research was conducted, and this is likely to have influenced their particular approach to the issues raised. As explained earlier in the article, the way we have organised the findings is not an attempt to categorise individual practitioners or interactions. Instead, we present the findings as a starting point for further dialogue about approaches to digital play in early childhood and the next steps for working with practitioners.

Conclusion

Based on comments from practitioners attending a workshop to explore apps for children, we have developed tentative categorisations to support us as we think about how EY practitioners conceptualise time in relation to children's digital play. Focusing closely on how practitioners currently conceptualise time in relation to digital play can suggest new practical ways of experimenting with time in relation to digital play. We argue that through more 'in the moment' observations of children's digital play by practitioners, challenges to popular discourses will evolve. We also suggest that practitioners' own digital play experiences can contribute towards a more reflective and exploratory view of children's digital play.

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